



Carl Sagan

On God – Q & A with grad students and others at Cornell

Q: My question is, given all these demotions, what is your personal religion, or is there any type of god to you; like, is there a purpose, given that we're just sitting on this speck in the middle of this sea of stars?

SAGAN: I don't want to duck any questions, and I'm not going to duck this one. But let me ask you first, what do you mean when you use the word god?

Q: Well, I guess my question is, it's like, is there a purpose for, I mean, given all these demotions, why don't we just blow ourselves up?

SAGAN: Let me turn the question around. If we do blow ourselves up, does that disprove the existence of God?

Q: No, I guess not. I guess what I'm asking is, since as we kind of make God almost go away in this, through these demotions. . . Through the ages, we have, humans have created a mythological framework that has always involved some kind of, often involved some kind of higher spiritual . . . If that goes away, as we know more and more, and it seems harder and harder to prove that anything might exist like that, where does that leave us?

SAGAN: On our own. [Applause] – which to my mind is much more responsible than hoping that someone from the outside will come and save us from ourselves – in which case we don't have to make our best

efforts to do it ourselves. If I'm wrong, and there is someone who steps in and saves us, that's all right.

The word God covers an enormous range of different ideas (and you recognized that in the way you phrased the question) – running from an outsized, light-skinned male, with a long white beard sitting on a throne in the sky and counting the fall of every sparrow, for which there is no evidence, to the kind of god that Einstein or Spinoza talked about, which is very close to the sum total of the laws of Nature. Now, it's an observable fact, and a magnificent one, that there are laws of Nature, that apply through the whole universe. If that's what you want to call God, then of course God exists.

There are some other nuances. There is, for example, the deist god that many of the founding fathers of this country believed in, a *roi faineant*, a do-nothing king, the god who creates the universe and then retires, and to whom praying to is sort of pointless. He's not here now; he went somewhere else; he had other things to do. Now, that's also a god, a creator god, but very different from the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic one. So, when you ask, do you believe in God, if I say yes or if I say no, you have learned absolutely nothing.



Q: I guess I'm asking you to define yours, if you have one.

SAGAN: But why would we use a word so ambiguous, that means so many different things?

Q: It gives you freedom to define it.

SAGAN: It gives you freedom to seem to agree with someone else with whom in fact you do not agree. It covers over differences; it makes for social lubrication, but it is not an aid to truth. I think we need much sharper language when we ask these questions. Sorry to take so long in answering this, but this is an important issue.